



The way of
HOPE

*A Fresh Perspective on Sexual Identity,
Same-Sex Marriage, and the Church*

MELISSA FISHER



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

ISBN 978-0-8010-7295-6

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Some names and details have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals who have shared their stories with the author.

17 18 19 20 21 22 23 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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To Kayla,
I am forever grateful God let me be your little sister.
Thank you for always protecting and loving me
no matter what path I traveled on.
I love you.

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Foreword

Life is often filled with unexpected journeys.

When I felt called to start a church in Austin, God started me on one such journey. I sensed him asking me to “create a place where all people—including the gay community—can seek me and find me.” I said, “Okay, but you have to show me how ’cause I don’t have a clue.”

As I obediently followed his invitation to create a church where broken, hurt, dechurched, and unchurched people could explore and find faith, God began to grow my heart, compassion, and understanding for those searching for answers to their faith questions, including people in the LGBT community. I’ve had the opportunity to get to know many amazing men and women of various sexual identities and backgrounds and to be a part of their journey, learn about their lives, and hear their complex stories. Most of all, I’ve had the privilege of getting to watch as they found a love that surpassed all others. That love walked each of them down unique paths of understanding, growth, and freedom.

Eight years ago, I got to know Melissa as she bravely pushed through the fears of judgment and rejection that many people face when pursuing faith and began attending Gateway. Since then, I’ve had the privilege of watching her grow and pursue spiritual

maturity. She is now able to help others walk this path leading to greater life, love, and freedom. Melissa is one of the godliest women I know, and her life demonstrates the life and freedom Jesus purchased for all human beings.

In this book, Melissa takes you into her journey—a journey common to all people, gay or straight, searching for faith and navigating the confusing waters of the church and culture. On the one hand, there are churches that too easily shame and guilt people into external conformity, which creates religious Pharisees who look one way on the outside but who are rotting spiritually on the inside. On the other hand, there are churches that bend Scripture’s teachings and make accommodations for those in all seasons and situations of life, which end up offering nothing different from the world and culture around them. This leaves people, including those scattered across the sexual identity map, trapped in hurt and pain; they long for the life God offers yet feel hopeless to find it. Neither way is what Jesus came to offer.

Melissa invites all, gay or straight, confused or secure in their identity, to consider another way—*the way of hope*. It’s not a cookie-cutter, five-step way to go from being gay to straight. It’s not a coercive way to make people change or to produce behavior modification. It’s a personal way—uniquely crafted by the God who created each one of us—that offers life and freedom, joy and peace. It’s a way that can’t be controlled or put in a nice, neat box to be marketed in a church program. It’s a way offered by a personal God to all . . . if you are willing.

If you’re in the same-sex lifestyle and have found this book, my prayer is that you’ll read it with curiosity and openness. Give yourself permission to let go of trying to figure out your sexual attraction or relationships; instead, be open to just looking intently at Jesus to see if he is as crazy in love with you as he is with Melissa. If so, seek him with all your heart, breathe, and do not fear. Jesus wants to give you something far better than you can imagine. Be brave, take the first step, and read this book.

Foreword

If you are a family member or friend of someone in the gay lifestyle or a church leader or pastor, my prayer as you read is that you will listen, learn, and be open to considering a new way of relating to those with different sexual orientations, identities, and beliefs. I pray you will be inspired to get to know someone's story, usually of great pain, and be willing to walk alongside them and demonstrate how much they are worth to God. I pray this book leads you to move forward, able to show the love, compassion, and hope of Jesus because, thankfully, his love has the power to change us all.

John Burke
pastor of Gateway Church Austin,
author of *No Perfect People Allowed*
and *Imagine Heaven*

Introduction

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,
And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.
I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Robert Frost (1874–1963)¹

Have you ever struggled with knowing which way to go? Been in one of those moments when you could go right or left and didn't know which way to choose? Stood staring at that fork in the road, wishing it was a knife or a spoon? Felt split in two by a split in the trail?

Which trail did you choose? Did you peer as far as the eye could see down both roads? Did you flip a coin, letting Lady Luck have her way? Or did you passively step aside and let someone else choose for you? What was the outcome?

As a former backpacking guide in Colorado, I have journeyed many a trail. Through the beautiful Rocky Mountains, I have hiked day and night in pursuit of the next summit, that next breathtaking view.

Many different trails or routes can take you up a mountain, and there are many different ways to hike or climb back down. As any hiker will tell you, the joy comes in the journey and in the beauty upon reaching your destination. But life on the trail can be hard. The weather can change unexpectedly. The air becomes thin. Sudden complications arise. And sometimes the beauty is difficult to see, as each step brings pain.

The trail you thought would bring joy brings pain. It's difficult to trudge on. You might wonder, what if? What if I had hiked faster? What if I had drunk less? What if I'd packed that extra protein bar? What if I had chosen someone else to travel with? What if I'd taken a different path or chosen a different trail?

We travel down countless trails in life—you've hiked yours, I've traveled mine—all in pursuit of that moment we're willing to bleed for, hoping it will be the moment when you finally feel alive. We hike

and hike to reach that summit of security that promises freedom from the haunting insecurities only to see it for the false summit it is.

Have you heard of a *false summit*? Wikipedia defines it as “a peak that appears to be the pinnacle of the mountain, but upon reaching, it turns out the summit is higher. False peaks can have significant effects on a climber’s psychological state by inducing feelings of dashed hopes or even failure.”² It looks like the top, but its deception takes you emotionally lower than you were before. To put it bluntly, false summits, when hiking a long journey, suck.

You strain and bear the pain and finally reach the spot you’ve been working to obtain all day . . . all year . . . or all of your life only to be deflated by the higher peak staring down at you, taunting, laughing. The false summit leaves you broken, depressed, and struggling against the badge of failure you now wear.

My life has been full of false summits, hard trails, wrong turns. Has your life been filled with these too—trails that failed to bring you the joy you thought they would?

Glance back for a second. Why did you choose those trails? Did someone encourage you to go that way? Did the first steps seem to glimmer with excitement as they beckoned you their way or to offer some pot of gold at the end of the rainbow?

As a chord of Aerosmith’s hit “Walk This Way” runs through my head, I wonder, did you? Did you walk the way you were told to by the voice in your head that was so convincing when it said, “This is *the way!* Travel this trail and you can have it *all*. Walk this way and you can have exactly what you have been looking for”? What did the voice promise you as you headed down the trail?

How’s that trail working for you? From one traveler to another, is it time for a new trail?

This book is a collection of stories, wisdom, and views from some of the trails I’ve traveled down—some hard, many disappointing.

Introduction

A few walked me into hell. Thankfully, as Frost eloquently stated, “way leads on to way,” and all the other trails I’ve traveled have led to the one I’m now on.

Whatever trails you’ve been traveling down, I’d like to invite you to travel with me down a new one, *The Way of Hope*.



I

The Way of Perfection

They say that nobody is perfect. Then they tell you practice makes perfect. I wish they'd make up their minds.

Winston Churchill¹

The roots of our pretend self lie in our childhood discovery that we can secure love by presenting ourselves in the most flattering light.

David Benner²

I used to want to be a boy.

Seriously, literally, have the surgery. Change the name. Live from the new identity. Be a boy, not a girl. That's what I wanted.

It seemed to make sense with how I felt on the inside. At that point in my life, my feelings had been all over the map. After all, I grew up in the church, left the church, dated boys, then left the guy scene and ended up in the same-sex lifestyle and a same-sex marriage. Somewhere, in the midst of all of that, I contemplated becoming a boy.

I want to get that out in the open and allow you the opportunity to digest it and decide if you want to keep reading. No hard feelings if you don't, but it might be like driving by a car wreck on the side of the road: you don't want to look but can't keep yourself from it. This story is a little like that.

I did want to be a boy. With everything in me, that's what I wanted—did, wanted, past tense.

Now, well, things are different. I'm no longer in the same-sex lifestyle, and I am very content and happy being a girl, a woman.

Not only did I return to church, but I'm also now actually on staff at a church. As part of my job, I help women learn how to be godly women. I know—big change. I mean, seriously, the girl who used to want to be a boy now leading women on how to be women? I shake my head in disbelief too as I reread it.

How does that happen? How did the men's cargo shorts, visor, and T-shirt-wearing girl become a skirt-and-don't-forget-the-accessories-loving woman?

“Way leads on to way.”³

Let's start at the beginning—*The Way of Perfection*.

The Beginning

I am a born and raised Texas girl. I've owned a horse, cowboy boots, and a real cowboy belt with my name on it. I grew up in a conservative Christian home in central Texas, and as far back as I can remember, I was at church whenever the doors were open, which happened week in and week out, fifty-two weeks of the year. Every Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night we were there (we being my older sister, my mom, and me). My father was there sometimes and even led singing in our a cappella, don't-believe-in-instruments-style service. At least I think he led singing. I have a vague memory of him being up front occasionally. Maybe he was reading Scripture or praying. I'm not sure, but I know he came sometimes when he wasn't traveling for

work, and he traveled a lot. That I do remember . . . because of my Easy-Bake Oven.

Yes, I had an Easy-Bake Oven. Have you ever had one? It's a small, kid-sized, plastic oven that cooks little foods with a light-bulb, or at least it did then. As the independent baby of the family, I loved it because I could bake a cake all by myself. And I did. I'd take out that Pop-Tart-sized cake mix and add two or three spoonfuls of water with the purple spoon provided. Stir. Pour it in the tiny pan and voilà! One small, not-too-great-tasting cake! It was a big deal. I was making it one day for my dad, who was supposed to return home soon from traveling for work. I loved my dad, a lot. I thought he hung the moon or some other cliché phrase like that.

I made him that Easy-Bake chocolate cake with something resembling chocolate icing semi-smearred all over the top. Semi-smearred, because if you knew me well, you would know I am my mother's daughter and more chocolate icing would have gone into my mouth than on the cake. Chocolate icing, or anything chocolate for that matter, is one of my favorite food groups, along with popcorn, bacon, and pizza. Oh, and coffee. Praise God for coffee! In fact, I am drinking a nice cup right now. I'm trying to drink more green tea, but it's not working well. Coffee is like a warm, soothing mug of Jesus in my hand, and green tea . . . well . . . it isn't a mug of much. A mug of Jesus-blessed coffee is much better, because I like Jesus, a lot. Speaking of Jesus, I was talking about church, wasn't I? Not about baking or favorite food groups. Sorry. Like the funny dog in the movie *Up*, sometimes I chase squirrels.

So . . . let's get back to church.

Behave

For me, attending church brought mixed emotions. I hated having to get dressed up. In the early years, my mom would make me wear dresses, which felt like torture or child endangerment or

some other call-CPS-worthy title. After all, I was a tomboy who liked to be outside exploring, playing soccer, or doing anything that wearing a dress would interfere with. I had the boots and the cowboy belt, remember? Looking pretty and wearing dresses were very important to my mom. Wearing a yellow ruffled dress or something similar, my sister and I would get loaded up into the car and head to church, where I would sit next to my mom and sing.

I loved to sing.

Did I mention we didn't have instruments in our church? That always made singing interesting, because there was nothing to drown out the fourteen off-pitch voices loudly singing "Rock of Ages" or "When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder" or some other old hymn. Don't get me wrong here. I am not in any way making fun of the hymns or the way in which they were sung. Hymns are still my favorites and can bring me to tears faster than any Chris Tomlin or Jesus Culture modern worship song can.

The point is that the churches I grew up in were smaller, more intimate. People knew instantly who coughed, sneezed, or fidgeted in the pew, and fidgeting wasn't allowed. This might be why I enjoyed the singing, because I got to stand up for at least one to three songs, depending on who was leading. Mostly, I loved singing because my mother sat next to me, and I loved to hear her sing. She had, in my opinion, the most beautiful voice, and I wanted to be able to sing just like her when I grew up.

I'd look pretty and sing pretty every Sunday morning. I'd do my best not to fidget, as it appeared to me at the time that God would be very disappointed in me if I moved too much or bothered my sister or breathed too loudly or needed to go to the bathroom during church. That was a no-no as well. For any of those behaviors I'd get a look, a talking-to, my hand slapped, or that extended hand-holding that wasn't really an "I'm holding your hand because I love you" message but more an "I am sending you a firm and controlled message to stop whatever nonsensical thing you are doing or you will be sorry" type of communication.

I'd try hard to be good, silent, and still like a statue (or a corpse) because movement of any kind was strongly discouraged. Drawing on paper or coloring during a service was strictly forbidden. Don't even think about doing that. I remember the first time I attended another church and saw a child drawing on paper during the service. I was so scared for him that God was going to be mad at him for not paying attention. I had learned well enough by then that you don't want to make God mad. I'd heard some of the stories from the Old Testament and knew God had a temper.

I'd listen, pay attention, and learn important things about God and about what the Bible said.

Pretty

Like the first Scripture I learned as a child: "Pretty is as pretty does." Do you know this verse? This passage comes from the book of First Opinions, chapter 4, verse 2, and was quoted regularly by my grandmother on my mom's side, whom we called Memaw. For those not familiar with the Bible, this saying isn't in it, and there isn't really a book of the Bible called First Opinions. Sometimes well-meaning folks preach morality statements more than actual Scripture, so it's hard to know the difference. Like a good dose of "Cleanliness is next to godliness." Or, "God helps those who help themselves." And, always popular during hard times, the friendly reminder "This too shall pass."

Growing up as an adventurous girl, I would regularly hear pretty is as pretty does preached to me anytime I did something less than ladylike or anything my grandmother didn't approve of. So, as a little girl who didn't like dresses or things of that nature, I heard it a lot. It felt like one of those sayings that people bought printed on stationery or coffee mugs or quilted on pillows they put on their fancy couches that no one ever sat on. My grandmother had one such couch in the front room. It was the stuffiest room in the house, and no one ever sat in there. The couch and chair were horribly

firm and uncomfortable. Everything in there was breakable and not allowed to be touched. It would have been a perfect place for a crocheted “Pretty is as pretty does” pillow to reside.

The regularly preached passage embedded in me at an early age was “If you do pretty things, you will be pretty.” Of course, any time I heard it, it was because I wasn’t doing pretty. This led me down one path of thought: do good and I was good, do pretty and I was pretty.

The problem? I wasn’t that good at being good, or so I thought. I didn’t do things good enough or pretty enough. So naturally, I didn’t feel pretty.

In fact, one of the first memories of a feeling I had about myself was anything but beautiful or delightful. It happened while sitting in the living room of my grandparents’ house watching TV. The living room was a stark contrast to the front room, as you were allowed to move, breathe, and touch things. My grandfather had a plastic red-and-white fish that sat on the mantel above the fireplace, and when you opened its mouth, you found a smaller fish inside attached to a drawstring, which you could pull out and watch the big fish gobble back up. I am not sure why as a child watching the big red fish devour the little blue fish time and time again was so entertaining, but it was.

Maybe it was because my grandfather loved fishing and would take us all the time. I loved fishing with him and eating Chips Ahoy! cookies, which he kept in a yellow metal tin on his boat. The sun would warm the metal tin, causing the chocolate chips in the cookies to melt just a little, making them the best tasting Chips Ahoy! cookies I had ever eaten. His ring finger had been cut off just above his middle knuckle in a boating accident, and when I was a young child, my fingers perfectly curled around his nub, which I would hold on to as I walked beside him. He loved to play SKIP-BO and dominoes and every now and then would get so tickled playing that he would laugh so hard he would cry. Those were my favorite moments because my giant, gentle grandfather

would express emotions otherwise hidden in his quiet, reserved nature. He was the perfect match for my grandmother, who always shared what she was thinking. Not that she was a Chatty Cathy. Oh no. My grandmother had a reserved way about her as well, but of the two, she was definitely the talker.

While sitting in the living room one evening, she shared what she was thinking so very politely. I was sitting on the floor in front of my grandmother, halfway between the television and the couch. This was the prime spot to sit in when you were the “remote control.”

For you young’uns reading this, you may not be aware that at one time, the only way to change a channel on a TV was for some poor soul to have to get up off the couch or recliner, walk the entire distance across the living room, and turn the knob or push the button on the big, dresser-sized monstrosity of a TV.

Someone had to change the channel, and being the youngest of the family, I was naturally assigned the title of human remote control. I’d begrudgingly get up and turn the knob when *Happy Days* was over so the family could watch *The Dukes of Hazzard*, *M*A*S*H*, or some other epic early ’80s show. *Three’s Company*, *Mork and Mindy*, and *The Love Boat* were also worth crossing the expanse between the couch and the TV. But never would one turn the knob to watch shows like *Dynasty*, *Knots Landing*, or *Moonlighting*, as those were inappropriate with their sultry plots and scantily clothed actresses. And never, ever did we watch *Cheers*. It was a show filmed in a bar, and even as a young girl I knew that those people were bad, because drinking was bad, and watching that show might make me want to go to a bar and drink someday, and God wouldn’t like that.

Because pretty is as pretty does. I must do pretty. I must do what’s right all the time.

On that one day, sitting there in front of my grandmother watching TV, waiting to turn the channel, I did it: the sin of all sins. I picked my nose.

Yes, my prim and proper grandmother saw her granddaughter pick her nose. With the utmost gentleness, she cleared her throat and very properly said, “Melissa. . . Do you need a Kleenex?”

I punctuate carefully here, as there was a distinct period and pause at the end of my name when she said it. There was no condemnation in her voice, no tone that something was wrong, evil, or out of line. But the clarity, pace, and posture in the way she said it made me feel something for the first time in my life: *shame*. I felt shame for what I had done. I had done bad, which meant only one thing. I was bad.

On that day, the first seed of shame quietly dropped into the soil of my heart, and the silent tears that fell inside my soul watered it, and the seed took root. Shame is that way. One simple moment in time, and the seed drops in.

When was it for you, the moment you first experienced shame? When did its roots begin to choke the life out of you? Shame is like that. It’s the weed in your garden that seems impossible to kill.

Flawed

Shame and vulnerability researcher Dr. Brené Brown defines *shame* as “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging.”⁴ In that moment, sitting on the tan carpet in the wood-paneled living room in my grandparents’ house, I felt flawed, unworthy, alone. I felt *shame*.

Let’s pause here to clarify that the seed of shame dropping into your soul is different from guilt growing in your garden. Guilt is the awareness or feeling that “I did something bad.” Shame will turn that guilt from “I *did* bad” to “I *am* bad.” That’s what I felt in that moment. I was bad.

Today, I wonder, how could my grandmother have handled that moment differently? What could she have said or how could she have said it that would have enabled me to learn but not experience

shame? I ask because shame is so enslaving. It is so painful. I wonder how many times I have said something similar to my nephews, friends, other adults, or kids I have taught. Have I ever dropped a seed of shame unknowingly into someone else's heart? I ask because only now, as an adult, am I even capable of beginning to understand what effect shame has had on me or how many times I've experienced it.

Like an unwelcome guest at a party, shame makes an appearance, and I have one immediate reaction: I want to hide. It's an interesting moment to pause and ponder. Hasn't shame always initiated hiding?

One Choice

Follow me on a journey back in time to a perfect garden—the garden, Eden—where Adam and Eve, the first people whom God created, enjoyed blissful freedom and beauty. They lived and walked and talked with God. There was only one rule. That big tree in the center? See its fruit? Don't pick it. Like picking your nose, it was an unacceptable thing to do times a million.

One rule, one tree, one fruit not to eat. Step with me into the story.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Gen. 3:1–5)

The snake tempted her with a little truth mixed with a little deception, and Eve had a choice. She looked at the fruit. She played

and added to God's words. She thought. She judged. She rationalized. She saw profit for herself. She took it. She ate. Adam ate.

Instantly, everything changed. One choice, one moment, and shame entered in: "Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths" (Gen. 3:7).

Did you see it—the moment of shame? "They knew that they were naked." Exposed, vulnerable, naked, and in need. Isn't that what shame does? It leads us to cover ourselves to keep people from seeing our nakedness, who we really are. Like Adam and Eve, we create and cover to protect ourselves. Then we hide.

An Inconvenient Habit

This next confession of shame is a little more embarrassing, but it might paint a clearer picture: I used to wet the bed.

While my exact age is unclear, the memories aren't. My mother, out of love, tried to help me learn to stop this awful and very inconvenient habit and purchased a bed-wetting pad with an alarm. It was a metal-looking pad placed under the sheet that had a sensor in it. When pottied upon, it would emit a loud alarm. The goal of such a device was to wake children up and alert them, so they could get up and go to the bathroom. Unfortunately for me, this 1980 system included an antiquated alarm that emitted this awfully loud NEE-eu NEE-eu, NEE-eu NEE-eu that scared me to death. I woke up lying in a wet pool with the sound of a French police car driving through my bedroom. It was loud enough to wake everyone in the house, and my mother would then come to my bedroom and change my sheets as I stood by, silently swallowing the shame I felt as, once again, I couldn't make it through the night.

Tragic and scarring, I know. She meant well. (It may have worked though. I haven't had a bed-wetting problem since.) The point of the confession? It was another deposit in my bank of shame.

A Liar

Looking back, I recall one more deposit that occurred at an early age.

I was riding in the car with my mom on the way to day care. She very kindly asked if I had bubble gum in my pocket. I politely replied, “No ma’am,” as gum was not allowed at school. Unfortunately, my little devious brain had not calculated that the two pieces of three-cent Super Bubble bubble gum I had stuffed in my little pocket looked more like protruding mountains than the invisible pieces of yumminess I thought I was hiding. My mother dug her fingers into my pocket, fished out the sugary blessings, and said the nine most horrific words a child could ever hear: “We will deal with this when you get home!”

With tears streaming down my face, I was dropped off to face the eight-hour day of mental torture ahead of me. What happened later that day has stuck with me forever. While I didn’t face the guillotine, I did get the belt, which, in the late ’70s and early ’80s, was allowed and encouraged, at least in my conservative, Bible-belt-wearing family.

Everyone I knew got spanked, and anyone older than you by twelve years or more could spank you. Your rear was free game at that time if you were a kid. It’s just the way things were. I know that for some, spankings were more abusive in nature and done out of anger, rage, or hate instead of love. I didn’t experience that, but this isn’t about the pros and cons of spanking. It’s about the extremely odd, rare, and honestly unexplainable moment that happened *after* a particular spanking.

My mother picked me up from the bedroom (where I had been spanked) and carried me into the kitchen, which she had *never* done before. She walked to the oven, which had been preheated, opened the door, and leaned me over so I could feel the heat. She then asked, “Melissa, do you feel how hot that is?”

With tears streaming, I replied in a scared, shaky voice, “Yu-yu-yeesss maa-ma’am.”

She said, “Well, that’s nothing compared to how hot it is in hell, and that’s where you’ll go if you keep lying.”

I’ve never lied since.

At least I wish I could say that. But I can’t, because I have . . . more times than I’d like to admit.

That moment didn’t teach me not to lie. I wish it had. I know my mother meant well in trying to teach me to be good. While this technique is creative in nature, I highly recommend never using it in your own parenting. It won’t keep your kid from lying. What it did do was throw gasoline on the fire of shame and fear that had begun to ignite in me.

The Rules

Pretty is as pretty does, right? Like Adam and Eve, I began to know what I had to do when I didn’t do pretty. I knew I needed to cover. I knew I needed to hide. The fig leaf I decided I could best hide behind was . . . perfection.

Whatever you do, do it right! After all, God is always watching.

Make the list.

Check it twice.

Keep all the rules.

He’ll think you’re nice.

Off with my little poem in my head I went. With the winds of shame pushing at my back, I stepped forward and began my journey down the path of perfection. A baby legalist was born.

Do you know the term *legalism*? Like all isms, it’s not something you want to strive for or have as a character trait. Legalism is defined as a “strict, often too strict, and literal adherence to law.”⁵ Follow the law. Follow the rules.

I liked rules. You could hide behind them quite nicely. The simple rule about rules: keep them and all will be nice.

For those of you familiar with the Bible, you'll understand this one: I loved the Law.

For those of you who don't crack open the Bible too often, in Old Testament times God had a guy named Moses write down a bunch of rules for how the Israelites were to live. A big list of things they were to do or not do. The religious leaders who were really good at following them in the New Testament were known as Pharisees.

As a little girl, I started storing rules in my head. They weren't as detailed or as complex as the laws the Israelites had, but then again, I was only six-ish at the time. They were being spoken and/or properly modeled at all times, which was a problem, because Jesus came so that we didn't have to worry about keeping rules or laws. (We weren't very good at keeping them anyway.) As a little girl, I never got that memo. Instead, my parents, grandparents, teachers, church, and so on all sent messages to me on how to live "right" or do "right." Through my "pretty is as pretty does" filter, I took those messages and turned them into rules I had to keep so that I could be "right."

I became the good kid, the rule follower, the peacekeeper.

Praise

Yes, I became a professional observer of the world around me. I would watch and learn for the new rules I needed to live by. Following the rules brought peace and attention, and my addictive personality would soon learn that if you not only followed the rules but also excelled at them, you would get something even better than attention. You would get praise!

Receiving praise from others became my drug of choice. Throughout my life, the voice in my head would haunt me and whisper, "Do it right and they will praise you." Yes, just one more puff on the pipe of pleasure from the praise of people. It would be impossible to make it through the day without this drug in my

system, and the voice only got louder as I grew older. Other lies would soon follow: “If they don’t praise you, they don’t like you. If they don’t like you, they will leave you.” The only balm that seemed to soothe the wound of abandonment that took over my life, like a terminal cancer, was the pleasure I could earn from people. So I began hustling for approval.

Yes, I even started hustling God, earning favor, working hard to earn his praise.

So began my journey of saving myself, checking one box at a time like a good little Pharisee.

- Don’t talk back.
- Be still in church.
- Don’t run in the store.
- Use a tissue.
- Don’t smack your gum.
- Don’t fight with your sister.
- Don’t cuss.
- Make good grades.
- Don’t dance.
- Don’t drink.
- Don’t have sex with boys.
- Don’t embarrass the family.
- Make Mom happy.
- Be the best.

Check.

Check.

Check.

Make the list.

Check it twice.

Keep all the rules.
He'll think you're nice.
Earn.
Perform.
Repeat.
Earn.
Perform.
Repeat.
A good little Pharisee you will be.

Perfection

The Pharisees, religious leaders, were known for and prided themselves on keeping every law perfectly. They were so good, in fact, that they often had the entire Torah (the first five books of the Bible) memorized perfectly. They pretended to be all about God, but when Jesus came in the flesh, they wanted nothing to do with him except to kill him—and they did.

Why such hatred? Because Jesus saw through them. He saw past their rule keeping and legalistic living to their prideful, self-righteous hearts beneath. They didn't want him to be God, because they enjoyed being their own gods.

If you're new to Jesus, there is one thing you will learn as you get to know him: he is not a big fan of prideful people, especially arrogant religious leaders who constantly turn down their noses at others. In fact, he had so much against the Pharisees that he gave them seven warnings, accusations, or woes (depending on the Bible translation you use) about things they were doing wrong. He was so passionate about their prideful living that he called them hypocrites, blind guides, and snakes or a “brood of vipers” (Matt. 23:33). Strong language, I know!

Listen in to Jesus as he warns them:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and

self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. (Matt. 23:25–26)

How kind of Jesus to put this type of living into clear perspective. A life of prideful perfectionism is not the way to go. Focusing on outward behavior will never bring you life. But before we start judging the Pharisees too harshly for being so externally focused, I need to pause and remind myself and you that I was one. I wanted everyone to look at my outward deeds so they wouldn't see what I was inwardly.

Perfectionism is “a self-destructive and addictive belief system that fuels this primary thought: ‘If I look perfect, live perfectly, and do everything perfectly, I can avoid or minimize the painful feelings of shame, judgment, and blame.’”⁶ In those early moments as a little girl, I didn't want to ever feel those feelings of shame again.

Decades later I found myself, like the Pharisees, wrapped in a web of addiction and an absolute love of not only getting it right but also being the *best*. I wore perfectionism as a badge of honor for all to see while I hummed along:

Look at my badge.
Isn't it neat?
If you could be better,
You could be like me.

It's Okay, I Can Manage

It's as if my life was a vending machine and the same coin was dropped in day after day, week after week, year after year. One side of the coin was labeled *Pride* and the other side *Fear*. Whichever side faced up as you slid it into the machine didn't matter, as the same perfection-filled performance was dispensed out in my life. I couldn't stop, and honestly, I didn't want to. My pride was addicted to my perfectionism, and my fear couldn't handle showing up any other way.

I'd make the list, check it twice. You've been reading enough to know by now that I'd do anything to get everything right. This would be one of the largest stumbling blocks I'd trip over time and time again in my life. The real problem with my perfectionism was that I was constantly looking at *me*. I was looking at my performance, looking for more praise.

Perfectionism puts you on a path of self-sufficiency that makes everything, including salvation, about you. What I would later learn was that my own self-righteousness was the wall standing in the way of experiencing the fullness of what God had for me—grace. As Edward Welch so perfectly states, “And if we think we are usually good, then God is usually irrelevant.”⁷

Ouch. If I am honest, God was irrelevant. Self-made saviors don't need someone else to save them. My perfectionism made God present but irrelevant. This would cause me many years later to wreck the train that my life was traveling on. As I stared down the tracks looking at the rubble, I realized they were leading nowhere. Like a small electric train circling under the Christmas tree, the way of perfectionism kept me circling round and round, going nowhere.

Yes, the train of perfection fell off its tracks, and I couldn't do anything about it. But that's a couple of chapters away.

For now, we have a nose-picking, bed-wetting little girl full of shame becoming a perfectionistic Pharisee. The agreement was made. Whatever it takes, get it right. As the next chapter of my life began to unfold, bringing with it chaos and secrets, it would take a lot more to keep getting it right.